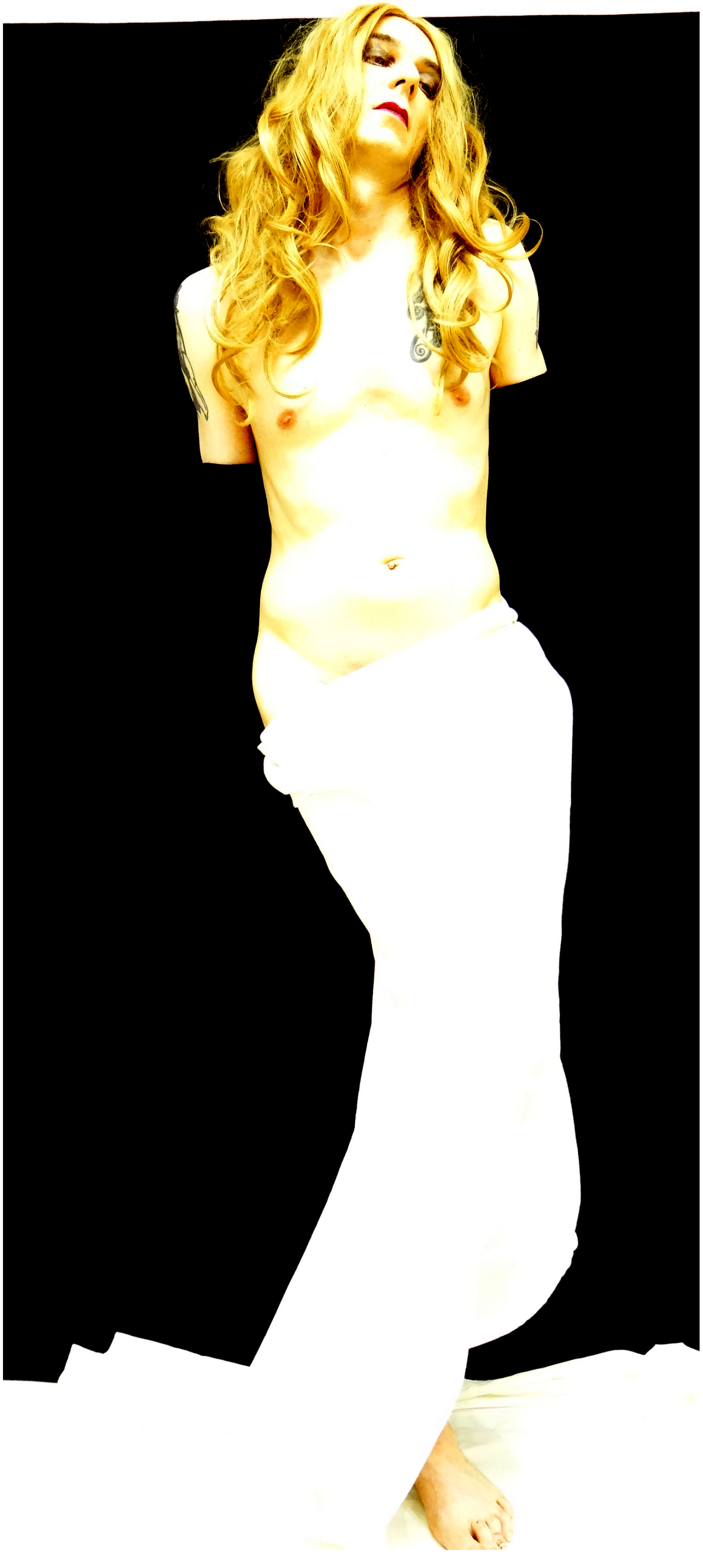
Degendering Venus, Becoming Aphrodite

Documentation



In classical times, the binding of both Hermes (Mercury) and Aphrodite (Venus) into a single unified body created a dualistic, ambiguous entity known as the *hermaphrodite*, which has featured since in mysticism, alchemy, religion and art.

These images are a simple response to classical sculpture, recreated to reflect the state of my personal ambiguity of being, whether a female mind in a male body, or a feminized body that still retains male characteristics.

In uniting both, I inhabit that awkward space between personae which exists during the process of 'becoming' my other self; a process that has never been presented or shown to anyone before its documentation in the film *Beyond 100 Days*.

By wearing full makeup and the hair which I've always identified as being the 'most feminine' (see *Stevie Nicks* in *A Self-Portrait in Six Hairstyles*), yet presenting a degendered yet obviously masculine body (with no breasts), I challenge both the viewer – and myself – to decide what, and who, it is they're looking at.

Therefore these images therefore serve as a personal coming-to-terms with this intermediary state, neither quite female but aesthetically beyond the male, by embracing the contradictions and duality of being, literally, 'two persons in one body'. By finally giving this difficult 'middle ground' a presence, and a voice, I hope to take steps toward creating a personal sense of unity by blurring the lines between what I would define as 'him' or 'her' and become more at ease with that essential but usually hidden phase of transition.

In presenting these images I also aim to challenge and reconstruct traditional concepts of beauty and gender, to allow for the presence of the third state of being, which was depicted classically in works such as the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite,* but which in contemporary society still seems to cause great concern for many.

By re-gendering, or indeed *de*-gendering iconic images of masculinity or femininity, I hope to explore the nexus that exists between both genders, as well as expand my continuing research into the living body as a sculptural object, and the relationship between the *created* sculptural item, and the original human source.

Research

In setting out to create these images I was well aware that I was treading very familiar ground. I was also keen to avoid repetition, unintentional humour or what Roger Scruton refers to as the “false art of our time, mired in kitsch and desecration”, which he explains as the result of a loss of a sense of wonder about the world, a rejection of not only beauty itself, but also the “habit of sacrifice”. In considering what this meant, I came to the conclusion that it is also due to the disappearance of religion and reverence, as we view Greek sculpture now as 'art works' when in fact they were created (originally) as images of worship, and subject to strict rules governing their representation (e.g that Aphrodite could be the only female rendered even partially nude).

I was not interested in subverting, degrading or belittling classic images of beauty and masterful craftsmanship – but only in re-interpreting them through my own visual and cognitive apparatus, to *personalize* them and attempt to make myself one with them, in order to understand them and their timeless appeal better. By putting myself in their place, literally, I could contrast and compare the real and imperfect anatomy of flesh and bone with the perfect anatomy of the ideal athlete or the divine goddess. And in so doing, offer a hint of an alternative aesthetic that is neither fixed male or female, but both simultaneously, in a *gestalt* sense of one thing that is also another:

“Although beauty presumably has no gender, in Western culture beauty has generally been understood as a feminine ideal...the gendering of beauty does not have its foundations in ancient traditions. On the contrary, in Classical antiquity, cults of beauty existed for both sexes, *and androgyny was often admired, particularly in Hellenistic Greece*.”
- (*Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late 20th Century,* Neal Benezra & Olga M. Viso, p. 101 – my italics).

In presenting my *mere* body as an object, as any piece of sculpture is, I pose the question: is the natural more 'real' or desirable than an 'ideal'?

“Western aesthetics, grounded in Platonic theory, which insists upon the primacy of the ideal forms, proscribes the exact representation of the natural world as seen, and has therefore at times attached a negative value to verisimilitude. Nevertheless, despite the classical tradition espoused by the academics, which promoted the ideal over the exact representation of appearances, the history of sculpture has been a continuous dialogue between these divergent positions.”
- (*The Body in Sculpture,* Tom Flynn, Everyman's Art Library, p. 163)

This in turn led to research into the reality and representation of the hermaphrodite.

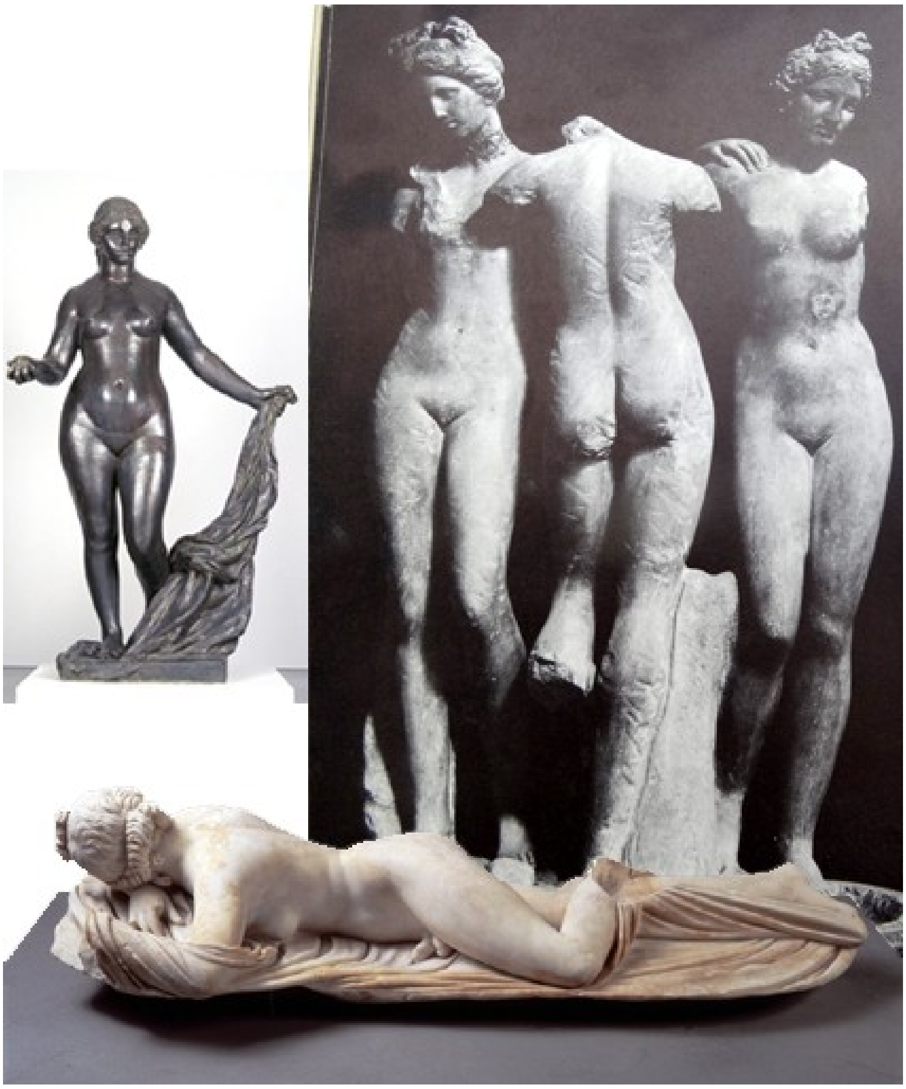
While the main purpose of making these images would be primarily personal, I also had to consider the reactions and interpretations of others, to ensure the works would be understood in their proper context, hence the week of research into the aesthetics of beauty in Western culture, specifically in a Graeco-Roman context.

The Images

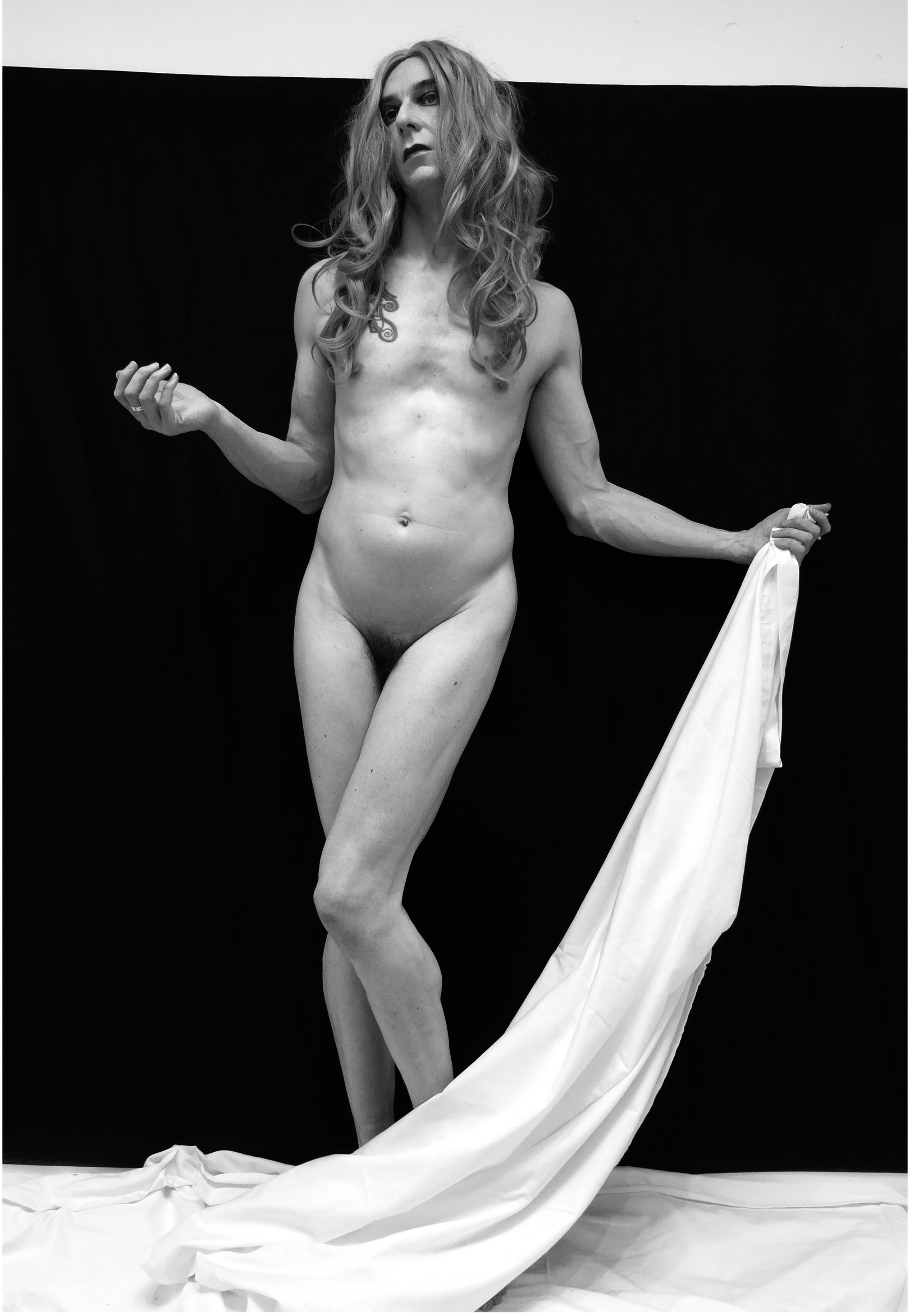
At the outset, a series of five pictures had been planned, based on:

- the Capitoline Venus;
- the Three Graces;
- discus thrower;
- the Medici Venus (de Milo);
- the sleeping Hermaphrodite

In the end only three of these were realised, as the Graces proved too difficult to Photoshop convincingly together from three individual images, and the Hermaphrodite seemed too obvious; although a further image, after Renoir's *Venus Victorious*, was also produced, but not printed due to its not being modelled after a Classical original.

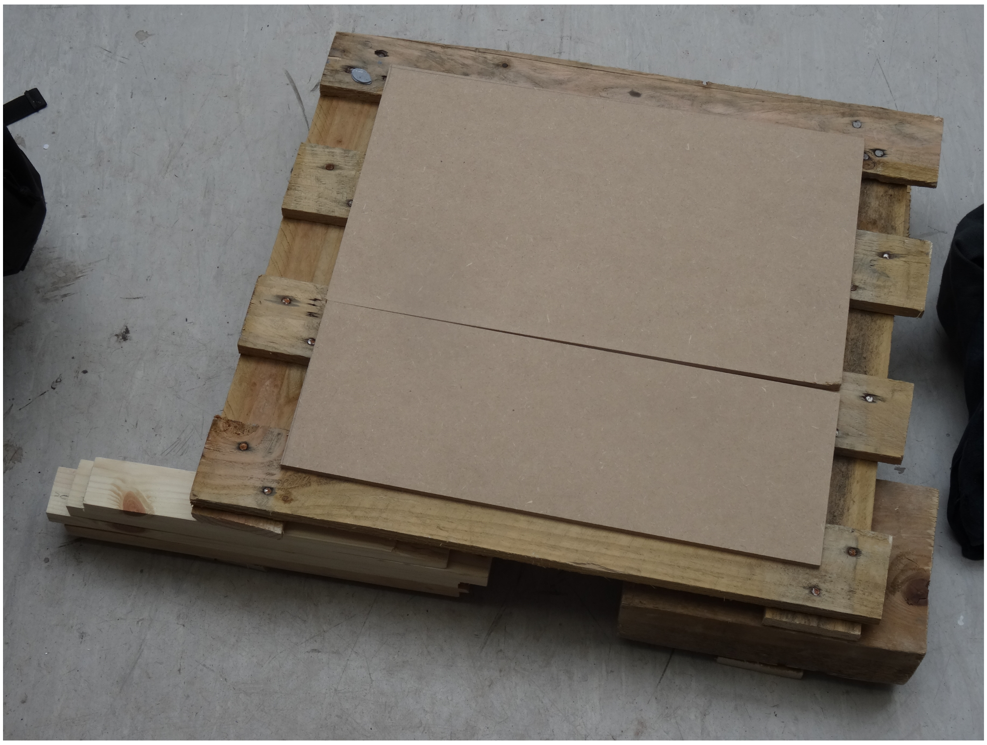


Concepts originally considered but not rendered in the final prints: clockwise, Renoir's *Venus Victorious, the Three Graces,* and *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*



The discarded *Venus Victorious,* after Renoir

Practical Work



The construction of the plinth

Building the stage

Sources of Research

Beauty: A Very Short Introduction, Roger Scruton, Oxford
The Body/Body Problem, Arthur C. Danto, University of California Press
The Body in Sculpture, Tom Flynn, Everyman's Art Library
Classical Sculpture, George M.A. Hanfmann, Michael Joseph
The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form, Kenneth Clark
Queer Beauty, Whitney Davis, Columbia University Press
Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late 20th Century, Neal Benezra & Olga M. Viso
Serial/Portable Classic: Multiplying Art in Greece & Rome, Salvatore Settis & Anna Anguissola, Fondazione Prada
http://tate.org.uk online media
White Walls, Designer Dresses, Mark Wigley, MIT Press